

The Palo Alto Police Department's new license plate-reading cameras led officers to draw their guns on innocent people, police said yesterday.

The driver and passenger were handcuffed for about three minutes before police figured out that they had the wrong people, Capt. James Reifschneider said.

The car's legal license plate had been swapped with plates from a stolen car that looked just like it, Reifschneider said.

Cameras that were put up this summer alerted officers to the car's presence in Palo Alto on Monday afternoon.

Officers spotted the car on Alma Street. The plate number and the color, make and model - a blue 2013 Audi A3 - matched the description of a stolen car, police said.

Officers conducted a high-risk traffic stop with rifles drawn at 4:39 p.m. at Alma Street and Hawthorne Avenue.

Both people in the car were fully cooperative, Reifschneider said.

The department will determine exactly how many officers drew guns during a review of the incident. Highrisk stops are standard procedure when stopping a stolen car, Reifschneider said.

The police department is in the process of putting up 20 license plate-reading cameras focused on busy streets and entrances to the city.

Unlike Atherton and Los Altos, Palo Alto police aren't providing a list or a map of where the cameras will go. "If criminals are made aware of the location of the devices in advance, they could take measures to avoid detection by the system," the department says on its website.

Approved in April

Council unanimously approved the use of license-plate reading cameras on April 3. Before that vote, the department had just one license plate-reading camera that was attached to a police car.

The cameras record all license plates and send them to a database managed by Flock Safety, a company that specializes in the technology.

Flock Safety then notifies police if there's a hit on a stolen plate. The city has a three-year, \$174,400 contract with the company.

At the April 3 meeting, Mayor Lydia Kou said she was worried that innocent people would get stopped.

"How do make sure that the officers don't just drag them out and put them into handcuffs? I would really want to know that there's a procedure in place that's not going to misidentify someone," she said.

Reifschneider said that risk is always there, but officers will confirm that the plate and the car match the description of the one that was stolen.

"Then it really doesn't matter whether the person driving the car is the one who stole it or whether they've given it to someone else - we're trying to recover a stolen vehicle, and we have to assume the person driving it is aware it's stolen until we sort out otherwise," he said.

Reifschneider and Kou didn't talk about what officers would do in a situation like on Monday when the description matched but it was still the wrong car.

The use of license plate-reading cameras, specifically Flock cameras, is sweeping the Peninsula. Los Altos, Woodside and San Carlos councils have all approved contracts with Flock in their cities since the beginning of this year. Redwood City, Belmont and Menlo Park are looking into the idea.

Atherton suit

Atherton was sued over a car stop prompted by a false read by one of its cameras.

A security guard named David Burkleo was pulled over on April 16, 2021, after Flock Safety told police that he was driving a stolen car.

The cameras thought the H's on the license plate were M's because the plate was dirty, Burkleo said in his lawsuit.

A license plate nearly identical to Burkleo's - aside from the H's being replaced by M's - had been reported missing.

Three officers followed Burkleo for several minutes before pulling him over.

They demanded at gunpoint that he throw his keys out of the window, get out of his car and lie down on his stomach in the road for handcuffing, the lawsuit says.

Burkleo claims that officers didn't read his plates themselves until 20 minutes after he was detained, and then they let him go. The case was settled in March, according to court records.

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Cartwright, B. (2023, August 17). Guns drawn on the wrong driver - License plate camera led to victim. *Daily Post (Palo Alto, CA)*, p. 1. Available from NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/193BE13910837E48>.

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